

U.S. Army (Richard W. Jones, Jr.)



Providing security for Afghan populace is key part of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy

Recalibrating the Afghan Reconciliation Program

BY AMIN TARZI

In December 2001, the framers of the Bonn Agreement laid out a plan to end conflict in Afghanistan, heal a divided, wounded nation, and bring about lasting peace.¹ However, 9 years later, stability remains elusive, and these goals have yet to be fully realized. Theories abound but are ever evolving as to how to make progress; bright new ideas are mixed with transplanted

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success stories but yield unsatisfactory results. One area that has warranted much attention is the promotion of national reconciliation. Reintegration and reconciliation are recognized as key strategies to conducting a successful counterinsurgency. Reintegration focuses on individuals within enemy ranks who can be incentivized to abandon their allegiance to the cause; reconciliation offers amnesty and political position to enemy leadership to bring them into the fold.

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Such efforts have been under way in some fashion since the Taliban lost control of Kandahar, its last major stronghold. However, lacking a cohesive, cogent strategy, the various local and international promoters of reconciliation often undermine each other's efforts and confuse their target audiences—the Afghan people and insurgents—emboldening an otherwise fragmented enemy and forcing a large segment of Afghans to seek alternative measures for their future safety. A critical eye on the past and frank discussions with senior Afghan government officials should elucidate the present and offer lessons learned and insights into how to realize national reconciliation.

Road to Reintegration and Reconciliation

The journey began in December 2001 with the Taliban's evacuation of Kandahar. Since that time, both Afghan authorities and the

international coalition have made formal and informal overtures to the Taliban and subsequent neo-Taliban to reintegrate them into the Afghan constitutional system. Both the international and Afghan-led tactical and operational level reintegration initiations to lure neo-Taliban underlings and foot soldiers have reported some successes. However, when seen through the lens of the realities on the ground and with the increase in the areas controlled by insurgents, the overall picture is not a cause for celebration. Furthermore, these independent, uncoordinated efforts have at times worked at cross purposes, leading to confusion and undermining their effectiveness.

Part of the challenge has been defining the targets of reintegration and reconciliation efforts. According to Robert Crews of Stanford University, between 2001 and 2007, “no clear legal or political guidelines” were offered to differentiate between “moderates” and “extremists” when it came to reconciliation or reintegration agendas with respect to the neo-Taliban in Afghanistan.² Afghan government rhetoric over the years reveals the challenge for promoters of reconciliation to direct their efforts at the correct individuals. Hamid Karzai, prior to being selected as the chairman of the Interim Authority of Afghanistan on December 22, 2001, declared a general amnesty for all Taliban forces except the “criminal” elements within the movement. He explained in April 2003 that there was a distinction between “the ordinary Taliban who are real and honest sons” of Afghanistan and those “who still use the Taliban cover to disturb peace and security in the country.” No one had the right, Karzai warned, to harass or persecute anyone “under the name Talib/Taliban” from that time onward.³ A year later, in February 2004, Karzai—perhaps in an attempt to clear some of

the ambiguity surrounding the identity of the irreconcilables among the neo-Taliban—further clarified that there were roughly only 150 problem Taliban leaders who had links with al Qaeda.⁴ However, the Afghan government has yet to publicly identify these 150 individuals, and it has not actively pursued them.⁵

A further challenge that has been perpetuated by this ambiguity is the lack of a coordinated strategy between the Afghan government and international coalition. Currently, there are a number of parallel and at times competing reconciliation programs. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), in its peace and reconciliation program, has decided to cast the widest net possible in offering talks to almost all segments of the insurgents of Afghan origin in the country. The criteria by which insurgents can be reintegrated and reconciled, according to the GIROA-led agenda, are renunciation of violence and joining “in a constructive process of reintegration in order to benefit from a chance at peace, improved governance, and economic development.”⁶ But the gap between what is desirable and what is achievable remains wide, and most stakeholders are either reluctant to measure the width of this gap or, for expediencies beyond the Afghan borders, choose to see it as a trench worth ignoring. The haphazard, divided, and seemingly conflicting nature of the ongoing peace initiatives has given the impression among an increasing number of Afghan leaders and large segments of the Afghan population that the agendas of both the GIROA and foreign peace initiatives go beyond persuading the neo-Taliban to accept the current constitutional system. The question asked by many senior members of the Afghan National Assembly’s lower house, the Wolesi Jirga (House of the People), is whether the peace and reintegration process is meant to

make the insurgents a part of the national process, or if it is the other way around.⁷

While the ambiguity continues through 2010, there are positive steps toward uniting under a common vision. Since 2009, the major players have come to agree that absent a viable, broad-based reintegration and reconciliation plan, the Afghan conflict will not end within a politically acceptable timeframe. The Afghan-led efforts on reconciliation and reintegration as outlined by Afghan President Hamid Karzai in the January 2010 London Conference have enjoyed backing by Afghanistan’s international partners, including the United States.⁸ While Washington began in 2004 to support Karzai’s call for reintegrating former members of the Taliban, and certain troop-contributing states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had reached out in one form or another to the neo-Taliban since the early days of military campaign in Afghanistan, it was not until November 2009 that ISAF officially embraced a reintegration agenda by officially joining the peace and reintegration program with the establishment of the Force Reintegration Cell (F-RIC). To justify

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this action, the main argument has been that the attacks of September 11, 2001, were not perpetuated by the Taliban, nor was building a functioning democracy in Afghanistan a major goal of the U.S.-led international intervention



Karzai's peace and reconciliation program for neo-Taliban forces promises political struggle

there following the attacks. The goal, as articulated by President Barack Obama in March 2009, was (and has remained) to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return in either country in the future.”⁹ As such, if the neo-Taliban—inclusive of Hezb-e Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (HIG) and other affiliates, but exclusive of al Qaeda or any

terrorist outfit with an international agenda and reach—come to the table and accept the current Afghan governing structure, then compromises offered by GIRoA would be accepted and indeed supported by ISAF. As President Obama stated, other than the “uncompromising core of the Taliban,” the rest of the insurgents should be provided an opportunity to reconcile.¹⁰ At the London Conference, the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan, among other countries, pledged upward of \$150 million to support the reintegration process.¹¹

But the devil is in the details, and uniting under a common strategy to achieve the vision will prove challenging. The GIRoA and some ISAF member states believe in a wholesale, blanket amnesty for all Afghan insurgents. The plan for the GIRoA-led strategic level peace and reintegration program was partially laid out during National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ) held in early June 2010 in Kabul. The aim of NCPJ was to build a national consensus among Afghans to support the reintegration and reconciliation efforts. Through the NCPJ, the Afghan authorities conveyed that the people of the country desire peace. There were no expectations of a miraculous deliverance by the NCPJ, but the sentiment among foreign backers was that the NCPJ should set the agenda for future steps toward reconciliation and reintegration as well as establish inclusive guidelines for the principles of Afghanistan’s statehood in light of the challenges of absorbing these combatants, for whom the very nature of the state formed out of the Bonn process is anathema. Bureaucratically, the NCPJ was the link between the London Conference and the Kabul Conference held in July where details for Afghanistan’s peace and reconciliation program were formally presented to the donor community for funds and political support.

The United States and a sizable number of Afghans both inside and outside the political system have reservations about reconciling those members of the Taliban who may be inseparably linked to international terrorist networks. For Washington, the issue of wholesale reconciliation has both domestic political and legal hurdles, even if a policy change was put into effect to align with the GIRoA position more closely. As the main vanguard of democracy and human rights, the United States would find it difficult to support a reconciliation program that would result in curtailment of the rights of women and minorities, have a noticeable adverse effect on freedom of expression, and lead to the dismantlement of democratic institutions.

Leaders of major Shiite and Uzbek-dominated political parties stayed away from the NCPJ out of fear of appeasing the neo-Taliban

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at the expense of achievements Afghanistan has attained since 2001. In a prepared statement, Hajji Mohammad Mohaqiq, leader of the People’s Unity Party of Afghanistan, stated that while peace and stability were vital to all Afghans, “the constitution and values it protects, like freedom of expression and faith, human rights, lawful administration, rights of social and ethnic groups, should not be sacrificed to appease the militants.”¹² Mohaqiq and the Uzbek-dominated National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan supported Karzai during the 2009 presidential elections, but the

policies of negotiation with the neo-Taliban leadership have steadily driven a wedge between the Afghan president and his most important non-Pashtun political allies.

Talking to the Neo-Taliban

Parallel to the official Afghan-led, ISAF-supported reintegration program, the Afghan president has multiple efforts under way to reconcile with the leadership of various neo-Taliban insurgent groups. Unlike the early attempts by Karzai in which select, albeit unspecified, insurgent leaders were deemed criminals, and thus irreconcilable, the latest *carte blanche* peace offerings seek to engage all neo-Taliban factions. Since 2008, according to press reports, President Karzai, through his family networks and with facilitation from the highest levels of the Saudi Arabian government, has established links with individuals within the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), Haqqani Network (HQN), or HIG, apparently regardless of their individual status within their respective organizations.¹³

The negotiations with HIG have since become formal, with Karzai himself meeting representatives of that party in Kabul in March 2010. During this encounter, the

on participation, excluding those individuals accused of corruption, impiety (*bedini*), national treason, and war crimes.¹⁴ Current members of the cabinet and provincial governors would be allowed to partake in the future government only if they resign from their posts 3 months prior to the new elections.

Rumors abound that Karzai's negotiations with mainstream Taliban, most notably with those members of QST who are deemed by Kabul as less controlled by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), are an attempt to thwart Pakistan's influence within QST. In Kabul, the theory that both supporters and foes of the unofficial reconciliation efforts with the QST leadership subscribe to is that the ISI is trying to influence the leadership of the QST into submitting to Pakistan's dictates in post-ISAF power arrangements in Afghanistan. Accordingly, the Afghan perception in general is that the arrest by the ISI in early 2010 of Mullah Abdul Ghani "Beradar," known to be the second in command of QST, was part of Pakistan's efforts to purge those members of the Afghan insurgency, regardless of their rank, who were becoming less obedient to Islamabad's plans. Discussions with Afghan, Indian, and ISAF officials a week before the NCPJ convened confirmed that the Afghan perception is that Pakistan's aim is to call the shots in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign forces by using QST, HQN, or HIG members and other willing partners who submit to Islamabad's vision of Afghanistan's road to stability.¹⁵

An Afghan foreign ministry official recently told this author that any arrangements with the neo-Taliban would be a transitory and unstable fix; for a more permanent and stable peace in Afghanistan, arrangements ought to be made with Pakistan with full ISI participation and acquiescence. According to a senior Afghan official involved in national security

officials in both Kabul and New Delhi characterized ISAF troop-contributing states as planning on "subcontracting" Afghanistan's security to Pakistan

HIG representatives presented the GIRoA with a 15-point document entitled "National Peace Pact." Key to their pact is the staged withdrawal of foreign forces by spring 2011. Furthermore, the pact requires new elections for the National Assembly with strict prohibitions

affairs, Islamabad does not favor reintegration, but prefers reconciliation between the GIRoA and all segments of the Afghan insurgency—but not until July 2011. It is then that the United States is expected to begin a drawdown of its forces, and the neo-Taliban would be poised to demand a much more favorable arrangement than that currently being offered by Kabul. Meanwhile, the official suggested, insurgents would maintain some pressure but would not fully engage ISAF forces in combat operations. Regardless of the actual troop strength and focus of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, the sentiments in both Afghanistan and neighboring India are that troop reduction is in the plans, which would change the game on the ground in favor of the insurgents and, by extension, Pakistan. In a stark similarity of language, officials in both Kabul and New Delhi characterized ISAF troop-contributing states in general and the United States in particular as planning on “subcontracting” Afghanistan’s security to Pakistan. While Islamabad is worried about a Kabul–New Delhi axis intended to keep Pakistan busy on two fronts, with regard to reconciliation and reintegration policies, India appears to have taken a harder line than Afghanistan, generally viewing the term good Taliban as an oxymoron.

Regardless of the true sentiments of the majority of the Afghan people, at the conclusion of the NCPJ, the GIRoA—namely Karzai—secured a national mandate, at least on paper, to achieve a peaceful end to the country’s three decades of almost perpetual conflict through national reconciliation. As expected, details of the reconciliation process were not agreed upon by the NCPJ, which called for the formation of a High Peace Council to handle the modalities of the peace process. The period between the end of the NCPJ and the Kabul conference provided

the GIRoA and its foreign backers time to concentrate on the minutiae of the reconciliation program and hammer out the details to discern between desired and achievable endstates. Time, unfortunately, is not on the side of the Afghan government, as the neo-Taliban’s strategy increasingly is to wait out the presence of ISAF combat forces. The current narrative of the conflict in Afghanistan and the region is that the West, led by the United States, is tired of its engagement and is looking for an honorable exit and wishes to

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leave behind a system bolstered by financial and political support that could maintain power in Kabul and other major population centers.

Clarity of Objective

The GIRoA concept paper on peace and reintegration begins with the preamble that the Afghan people “desire not only short-term security, but a consolidated, sustainable peace.”¹⁶ The GIRoA actions to carry out peace and reintegration efforts, most recently the NCPJ, increasingly appear to be short-term tactical moves lacking clear objectives for achieving a long-term consolidated, sustainable peace. The mere fact that the Hazarachs and Uzbek political leadership, who supported Karzai’s reelection efforts, chose to stay out of the NCPJ, is an indicator that if the peace and reconciliation program remains ill defined, Afghanistan may be heading toward the divisive environment that followed the fall of the last communist regime in Kabul in 1992.

For Hazarahs, who as members of the Shiite minority were subjected to directed brutality by the Taliban, the talk of inclusion of their former foes into the political spectrum reinvigorates horrible memories. Beyond concerns about the viability of the Afghan constitution, Mohaqiq cited the dispute between Hazarahs and Pashtun

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nomads in Behsud District of Wardak Province over grazing pastures as a reason for staying away from NCPJ. Hazarahs assert that nomads who have been infiltrated by the Taliban have attacked civilians in Behsud over pasturing rights, citing 19th-century claims to the land. The fact that the Behsud dispute coincided with the NCPJ was a vivid example of what Hazarahs call “the Peace Penalty”—namely, that those parts of Afghanistan that are peaceful have been denied not only political attention but also financial incentives. The Behsud dispute further fueled this sentiment. Consider the message being sent: neo-Taliban members bent on the destruction of GIRoA are being incentivized to join a peace process, while those who have remained peaceful and loyal to the GIRoA and are believed to have been victimized by the neo-Taliban sympathizers are penalized.

The history of the last debacle in Afghanistan when no clear plan was drawn for managing a postcommunist settlement should be revisited and lessons learned by all involved in the current peace initiative. Most of the individuals directly involved in the postcommunist civil wars that plunged Afghanistan into

perpetual chaos, which eventually led to the emergence of the Taliban, are still in leadership roles. Therefore, they should be familiar with the dangers of making short-term deals without considering their long-term consequences. Selective historical memory will prove Karl Marx correct: “History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce”—a distorted, costly farce.

Most of the Afghan, ISAF, and European Union officials consulted by this author agreed that there is a growing sense of uncertainty among the Afghan population. The following is a compilation of their recommendations regarding clarity of objective to guide GIRoA as it pursues its reconciliation program:

- ❖ The goal of reconciliation should be defined and contextualized.
- ❖ Clear, precise information campaigns explaining the reconciliation program’s goal of sustainable peace and countering the perceptions that the program is providing ISAF a graceful exit should help to alleviate Afghans’ concerns over the aims of the program.
- ❖ Shaping public debate about ISAF troop withdrawal is a shared responsibility of all troop-contributing states.
- ❖ The GIRoA needs to define and clarify the incentives that it can offer to the neo-Taliban leadership.
- ❖ The GIRoA needs to articulate the targets of the reconciliation efforts—defining who’s in and who’s out. Some expressed fear that some among the neo-Taliban leadership may still seek revenge for their defeat in 2001 and see reconciliation as a means to avenge their losses once the threat from international forces is diminished.

Mechanisms for Negotiations

The GIRoA concept paper on peace and reintegration designates Kabul—which translates into the executive branch of the GIRoA—as the overseer of the peace and reconciliation program. The GIRoA has established mechanisms for pursuing the process of reintegrating neo-Taliban foot soldiers into broader society. In addition, ISAF's F-RIC is fully engaged in supporting the Afghan-led process. However, for targeting the neo-Taliban leadership there should be an identifiable Afghan entity in charge of reconciliation. Most of the talks until now have been conducted by the Afghan president's family and close associates with minimal transparency. While a level of secrecy may be necessary for talks between a government and armed opposition forces, in a democracy that has an elected parliament and depends on a coalition of foreign forces for the bulk of its security requirements, the benefits of involving the elected officials and seeking a consensus among foreign partners outweigh the need for strict secrecy.

The challenge is that both reintegration and reconciliation are needed for success. As stated by Lieutenant General (Ret.) Sir Graeme Lamb, advisor to the ISAF commander in F-RIC, "Reintegration is not a standalone activity. . . . [it] is inextricably tied to reconciliation. For one without the other fails and both . . . are an integral part of the wider counterinsurgency campaigns."¹⁷ A senior member of the Wolesi Jirga indicated that the body was ready to play a constructive role in the reconciliation process if asked by the executive branch. In support of reconciliation, he argued that if the neo-Taliban were afforded a chance to play a political role through participation in democratic processes, their stance might become less militant. Those unable or unwilling to change, the official concluded, would not be incentivized through the overtures available through the Afghan government.

Afghan, ISAF, and European Union officials provided the following points to promote success of future negotiations:

- ❖ Women need to be active participants in the reconciliation program, not only in the NCPJ and its proposed High Peace Council, but also as part of the future negotiating teams. A common concern was that women's rights would become the most expedient sacrifice to lure conservative members of the neo-Taliban to join the current system in Afghanistan.
- ❖ The GIRoA needs to make specific reference to the safeguarding of Shiite rights as enshrined in the current Afghan constitution. Those consulted were confident that the GIRoA would emphasize minority rights; however, due to the sensitive history of the Shiite minority in Afghanistan, they argue that the GIRoA needs to provide clear and specific assurances to build confidence within the population that Shiite rights are a nonnegotiable part of any future agreements with the neo-Taliban.
- ❖ The GIRoA negotiating team needs to include respected Sunni scholars who can challenge the legality of neo-Taliban religious assertions (for example, rights of Shiites, education for women) from an Islamic perspective.
- ❖ On the role of foreign representatives, there was disagreement among the Afghans consulted. Most preferred an Afghan-led process with the direct backing of the United States

while some preferred that the foreign presence be that of an Islamic state such as Indonesia, Jordan, or Egypt. Two other countries mentioned were Turkey and Saudi Arabia; however, a senior Afghan security official dismissed Turkey for Ankara's special relationship with Afghanistan's Turkic ethnic groups, and more than one Afghan official voiced apprehension about Saudi participation because of Riyadh's "special" relationship with Islamabad and its history of support for the Taliban.

The U.S. Role in Reconciliation

According to Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, National Security Advisor to President Karzai, no war or peace effort can move forward in Afghanistan without U.S. leadership.¹⁸ Similar sentiments were echoed by a senior member of

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the Wolesi Jirga, who said that the premature departure of the United States would spell disaster. However, other Afghan officials claimed the United States could and would do as it pleased, which energizes the conspiracy theorists to conjure up Washington's "true" intentions in the region. The rationale is that if a power can do almost everything it wishes and chooses not to exercise this power, then it must have ulterior motives. With this backdrop, and as urged by a senior Afghan Foreign Ministry official, the United

States needs to provide a clear explanation of its agenda in Afghanistan, including the duration of its military deployment in order to control, or at least positively influence, the public narrative.¹⁹

Finally, officials from within the Wolesi Jirga and the broader GIRoA agreed that reconciliation and also reintegration require military strength to be successful. While there may be a trickling in of reintegrationists due to financial or other incentives, absent the threat of U.S. and other ISAF members' military might, the incentive for reconciliation would be minimal to nonexistent. Many Afghans consulted pinned much hope on the operations expected to be launched in Kandahar against the neo-Taliban to demonstrate the strength of the Afghan government and the international coalition. A senior Afghan official involved in security affairs termed the anticipated Kandahar operation as "key" to all peace and reconciliation programs.

Afghanistan's troubled history over the last few decades should serve as a lesson to both the GIRoA and its foreign backers. Lesson number one is that deals and promises have been broken by various Afghan parties as fast and as often as they were concluded, even when such agreements were sponsored by foreign patrons and signed in Islam's holiest place, Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, and that sadly, the only game-changer has been the threat and/or use of force by one of the local parties or from an outside source. The rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s and their subsequent defeat by the U.S.-led military campaign in 2001 are vivid examples.

Today, because of Operation *Enduring Freedom* and subsequently ISAF, Afghanistan finds itself on the road to a democratic and inclusive future. Never before have segments of the population, including women and religious minorities, enjoyed the constitutional rights they do today. In this light, while fully agreeing

with General Lamb's statement that reintegration is an inextricable part of reconciliation and that both are integral components of the current military operations, the collective effort now officially endorsed by the NCPJ needs to be discussed earnestly against the backdrop of historical evidence of past Afghan reconciliation efforts and with the foresight to avoid the pitfalls that haphazard deal-making may engender. The potential victims of botched and hasty negotiations may not be limited to minorities and women, but could include the Afghan constitutional system.

Lesson number two is that Potemkin villages built in Afghanistan have a tendency of falling on more than those who live near them. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions" (Bonn Agreement), signed December 5, 2001, available at <www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm>.

² Robert D. Crews, "Moderate Taliban?" in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, ed. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 241.

³ Amin Tarzi, "The Neo-Taliban," in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, 278–279; see also Ashley J. Tellis, *Reconciling with the Taliban? Toward an Alternative Grand Strategy in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), 5–6.

⁴ Tarzi, 281.

⁵ The list was presumably advocated for by Marshal Muhammad Qasem Fahim, the current first vice president of Afghanistan. See also Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 30.

⁶ Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), Summary Sheet of the Peace and Reintegration Program, May 2010.

⁷ Discussions with members of Wolesi Jirga, Kabul, May 24 and May 27, 2010.

⁸ For more on the London Conference, see <<http://afghanistan.hmg.gov.uk/en/conference/>>.

⁹ "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," March 27, 2009, available at <www.whitehouse.gov>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy* (RL30588) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2010), 36.

¹² "Mohaqq and Noorullah Saddat Won't Attend Jirga," *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* (Kabul), June 2, 2010, available at <www.outlookafghanistan.net>.

¹³ Ibid.; Tellis, 8–9.

¹⁴ "Misaq-e melli-ye nejat," unpublished document presented to GIROA by HIG in March 2010. I am grateful to Dr. Hussein Yasa, editor-in-chief of *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, for providing me with a copy of the original HIG document.

¹⁵ I held discussions with Indian, Afghan, European Union, and ISAF officials in late May 2010.

¹⁶ GIROA.

¹⁷ General Lamb's remarks from Emerald Express Strategic Symposium Series, *Afghanistan: The Way Ahead*, Marine Corps Base, Quantico, VA, April 21, 2010.

¹⁸ Meeting with Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, Kabul, May 26, 2010.

¹⁹ Meeting with senior Afghan Foreign Ministry official, Kabul, May 25, 2010.